

PATTERN OF RURAL GOVERNMENT

A Speech

By

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It gives me much pleasure to take part in the discussions on the important subject before you, "The Pattern of Rural Government". A seminar like this needs no formal inauguration: and in what I am going to say I propose to place before you my personal views on the main issues involved. I am glad you have here taken part in the seminar, so many with personal knowledge of the working of the community development programme. I am specially glad Shri Balwantray Mehta is here. The team headed by him has produced an excellent report which is under examination by the governments. The subject we are discussing is, by its nature, one on which no conclusions of a final character can be formulated at present. A movement which develops as a peoples' movement takes shape from the cooperation it elicits from the people. Its final form is eventually determined by the people, who take charge of it and run it as their own. Whatever we may say now can only be tentative and provisional—the initial stage as we see it.

2. I am in entire agreement with the principle that the people of India should assume full responsibility for the working of the community development movement. More than 40 years ago, when a mild instalment of responsible government was contemplated, the authors of the Montague-Chelmsford Report said: "Everything that tends to awaken the ryot's intelligence, that helps him to be an independent, self-determining man will hasten on the day when self-government will be attained". This is unquestionable now when full self-government has been established in India. We cannot build self-government on any other basis. If self-government is to be a reality, we shall have to ensure that the villager's "intelligence is awakened" and he becomes an "independent self-determining man". In other words, he must be enabled to manage his own affairs.

3. The foundation of any democratic structure in India must be in the village. You are all familiar with the part played by the village in India's polity through the ages. The village is the oldest unit known in the country and has survived through many centuries. Those of you who have read Shri Jawaharlal Nehru's book 'Discovery of India' will recall his reference to what the Nitisara of Shukracharya has said of the position of villages and village councils more than ten centuries ago and of the large measure of village self-government that prevailed in those early days. You will also remember what in 1830 Sir Charles Metcalfe wrote of the : "little

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republics having nearly everything they want within themselves; and almost independent of foreign relations; they seem to last where nothing else lasts. This union of the village communities, each one forming a separate little State in itself....is in a high degree conducive to their happiness, and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence". I do not want to paint a picture of a golden past. There were defects—factions, caste tyranny, stagnation, etc. But it is true to say that it was owing to the life in the village communities and the measure of autonomy they enjoyed, that we achieved social cohesion and stability and succeeded in preserving our traditional cultural values over many centuries. This survival of our values during long periods of foreign dependence is certainly due to the continuity of the village organisation. We must, therefore, recognise that modern democratic government can have a solid foundation only in village democracy. Let me not be misunderstood. What I have in mind is not restoring the old order of things. We should aim at reconstruction of the village to suit modern conditions.

4. We should build up village life so that it may meet adequately the demands of a modern technical and scientific civilisation. In more concrete terms, we should make every effort to reorganise village self-government so that the village may function as the primary unit for carrying out the philosophy and programmes of community development. You are all familiar with the fundamental concepts underlying the movement. I have set them out often but should like to reiterate them. The objective is to bring about social change. We seek to instil in the people "a will for better life"—to create in them a passionate desire for improving their standards of living through their own efforts and in full cooperation with their neighbours, recognising that all aspects of rural life are inter-related and that no all round improvement is possible unless rural life is viewed as one whole integrated life. As I have always said, this is essentially a human problem. It is not a mere question of applying known techniques. It is a human problem of enabling the sixty to seventy million families in the countryside to change their old time outlook and arouse enthusiasm in them for new knowledge and new ways of life. This change in outlook is sought to be achieved by a number of carefully devised social and economic programmes. The most important programme is for increased employment and increased production through the practice of scientific agriculture and through supplementary occupations like cottage and small industries. It is easily understood that in a country in which there is so much unemployment—in which agriculture is possible only for a few months in a year—increased employment and increased production must be the primary objective.

Secondly, progress is to be achieved through self-help—people helping themselves and with the widest possible application of the principle of cooperation. I should like to emphasise these two principles of self-help and cooperation. Cooperation is to cover not merely credit but all aspects of rural life. It is an agency of social change. It is my conception that the village cooperative should arrange for the multiplication of approved seeds needed for the village: for the purchase and storage of fertilisers; for the production of green manure and organic manures and for the supplies of all these in kind, besides money credit where needed. We want every village cooperative to have these activities. We also want them to extend their field of activities steadily. When we talk about cooperative farming, it is not something that we want to impose from outside. We want the community to decide what forms of cooperation it will take up. The village society may have, for example, programmes of construction of wells, of village electrification, etc. We also want cooperatives to have a definite objective that the people from their own savings will find the finances needed by themselves and also for the wider purposes of the Plan. Thirdly, we want the widest possible recognition of the principle that in an under-developed economy, community assets should be built up by the united efforts of the people. The unutilised energy in the countryside should be harnessed in all areas for building up assets of permanent value to the community. Lastly, we want not only the men but also the women and the young people to participate fully in the movement.

There is one other point which I should like to emphasise. It is the essence of the movement that every family should come under its influence. There should be a programme of improvement for every family for which it is assisted; every family should belong to at least one multi-purpose cooperative in its own right; every family should contribute its own share of voluntary labour for building up assets for the community; and the women and young people in every family should make their influence felt in this programme.

5. The question for this seminar is thus: how are we to reorganise our village to enable it to meet these demands? My own view is that there should be three institutions in every village—institutions which the villagers regard as their own—if this objective is to be achieved. First is the village panchayat. Equally important or possibly more important is the village cooperative. The third is the village school. Unfortunately, in our fragmented administration, these things are not inter-linked. These three should form the basis of all activities in the village; the agencies through which the community development programme should be worked in the village. The panchayat will exercise administrative and regulatory functions;

2

the cooperative will have as its aim social and economic development; and the school will bring together the entire community, and especially the women and the young people, to support these activities. It is round these that the life of the village should revolve and achieve self-reliant growth.

6. In this context, the question arises of the size of the primary unit—the village. This is touched on by Prof. Karve and others in their papers and is a subject of crucial importance on which the success of the movement depends. On this, I have expressed my views on many occasions. The basic idea is that of a community with ties of neighbourhood, common needs and identity of interest and in which there is a sense of intimacy—something of a larger family. To me this is fundamental. This has been our conception of village life for many centuries and in this lies its strength and vitality. This conception is reinforced by the results of studies in U.S.A. and other countries of the value of “small communities” in national life. Two books recently published on this are by Mr. Arthur E. Morgan. They are “The Small Community—Foundation of Democratic Life” and “The Community of the Future”. Mr. Morgan, as you know, is a renowned engineer and was the first Chairman of the T. V. Authority. In these books, he asks for the “recognition of the small, face-to-face community as a vital and to a large degree controlling factor in human life”. Again, he says: “These traits of mutuality which men get by living together in intimate relationships—which include intimate acquaintance, mutual confidence, regard and responsibility, a sharing of the risks and opportunities of life, and a feeling of oneness—turn a group of individuals into a social organism. They have not only individual characters and minds, but a group character and a group mind. It is this interwoven and inter-related complex of social traits, this social personality, which we have in mind when we speak of community as a quality of society.” This intimacy is vital not only in panchayats but also in cooperation. On cooperatives I should like to quote what Dr. Fauquet has written. Dr. Fauquet was till recently Chief of the Cooperative Service of the I.L.O. In the book from which I quote, he deals with the place cooperation has in a modern technological society with full employment:

“Cooperation’s special task, of which it alone is capable, is first to gather the innumerable little units of household economy and of peasant and handicraft economy and to group them into first-degree societies based on the ties of neighbourhood and similarity of needs. Next it has to group the first degree societies in federative organs of the second and third degrees for the satisfaction of

their common needs. After that, the problem will be to link the cooperative economy in its highest branches to the organs of the centralised economy which have developed in the opposite direction.

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"It will therefore be in vain if the State is tempted to extend its measures of restraint to the innumerable elementary cells of social life. The experiments multiplying before our eyes show that no sooner does the State undertake the organisation of the economy than it has to recognise itself the limitations of its own power and competence".

What has always struck me forcibly in the democratic countries of Western Europe is the vigour of the small communitiess and the strength of the cooperatives. The cooperatives—the primary ones—are compact bodies with small memberships and undertake varied functions. Sir Malcolm Darling has summarised recent information obtained as regards the size of such societies in the following passage:

"In 1955 the average for Western Germany's 11,000 Village Banks was 155, and for Switzerland's one thousand, only 110. Indeed, two-thirds of the latter had less than this. The Director of the Swiss Raiffeisen Movement once told me he considered the ideal number was from 50 to 100, and more recently a leading Italian cooperator put the figure at from 100 to 200. The Swiss Director further thought it a mistake to include more than one Commune (not very different from a village) in a society, and in Switzerland as in India the normal village has round about 500 inhabitants".

We should seek to reproduce this vigorous local life, with its freedom and initiative, in our country. We already have it, in fact, in several parts of the country. We should foster its growth everywhere. We have enlightened non-officials, men and women, who would be willing to devote themselves to this, if we enlist their support.

7. I should like, if I may, to pursue this point further. As regards the primary unit, there are two contrasting schools of thought. The first rests on the conviction that "human societies find their highest fulfilment in the intimate relationships of the small community which alone can offer the stimulation of collective effort". According to this view, the village, consisting of families that know one another and have a feeling of identity of interests is the natural primary unit. In such a unit, given proper conditions, the panchayat

ard cooperative can carry out, on their own initiative, the programmes I have indicated. They can develop sound village leadership and find, in their own area, young men who can be trained to give secretariat assistance of the simple kind which is needed. Only, it is necessary that in the early stages, the community development agency at higher levels should assist with advice and service and supplies. The second school refers to conflicts of interests between the larger and urbanminded landholders and others and suggests larger units for which paid staffs can be provided. I am myself totally opposed to this view point. I think a genuinely democratic society can be built up only on the basis advocated by the first school of thought. Our experience so far gives ample grounds for this belief. In the last few years the concept of social justice has been gaining ground and measures of land reform, rather radical in nature, have been received without opposition. Further, the large developmental expenditures that are being incurred in rural areas are bringing village communities together in a common effort to fight against poverty. It is in these combined efforts that we shall find a solution for conflicts of interests and factions that form a feature of a stagnant society.

8. I now come to another fundamental point. It is not enough to have village self-government; we want to widen rural horizons. Every one in the village should feel that he or she is part of a much wider society and has rights and obligations transcending his or her immediate interests. The village panchayat and cooperative should be linked up to larger units and through these to the State and India as a whole.

As regards the panchayat, the Balwantray Mehta Committee has recommended the devolution of functions above the village to the 'block'. Others regard the district as more suitable. Prof. Karve inclines to this latter view. On this, there should be no dogmatism. Every area should make its experiments with due regard to its own conditions. Certain broad considerations might, however, be indicated. Firstly, we want to get into the movement the future State legislators, because local self-government is the best training ground for public work in State and Central spheres. We should aim at attracting at this stage men and women who will become members of State Legislatures and of Parliament in the future. Another point is that we should get the type of non-official who can establish working relations with officials in the district—the Collector or Sub-Collector and the technical officials. The establishment of right relations with the 'Civil Service' is the biggest problem in democracy at all levels. As regards cooperatives, I have already quoted what Dr. Fauquet has said about "federative organs of the

second and third degree". The primary cooperatives should form themselves into unions and through these link up with specialised marketing and other societies and to central and apex banks and the banking system of the country.

All this linking up whether of panchayats or cooperatives should be by consent and experimentation and not imposed as a rigid pattern. But no progress in democratic devolution is possible unless the primary unit is established on sound foundations as a genuine peoples' movement.

9. I have so far dealt with institutions at the village level and higher levels. I would now like to mention certain disturbing factors in the working of the movement which it would be useful to examine in the Seminar. The first is the comparatively small attention that is devoted to establishing village panchayats and cooperatives in the areas covered by the movement. There are blocks which have gone through the community projects stage and reverted to the normal N.E.S. pattern in which not more than 30 per cent of the villages have panchayats and cooperatives. It should be recognised that, when a N.E.S. block is started, a commencement should be made everywhere with village institutions. Having established them, the village level worker should see that their working is improved from day to day. As a village level worker will have only 4 or 5 of these institutions, it should be possible for him in the course of less than 5 years to see that every family has a comprehensive programme of the sort I have indicated. The second disturbing factor is the tendency for multiplying staffs at lower levels dealing with individual aspects of development. Though it is recognised that the village level worker should be the common agent for all development activities, separate panchayat, cooperative and other officers are appointed. This multiplication of lower staffs is a danger to the movement. It deprives the people of their initiative and the movement tends to lose its dynamism. The third feature I would mention relates to repayment of loans. There are at present in many States large arrears in taccavi, fertilizer and cooperative loans. This is a serious danger to a sound rural movement. Unless punctuality in repayment of loans and thrift are inculcated from the beginning, community programmes as a whole are bound to suffer. I met the other day a cooperator who has been working for many years in Java. In his view, the main reason for the success of the movement in Java is the feeling of the villager that it is a sacred obligation to repay loans punctually. We should do everything in our power to instil strict punctuality in repayment and thrift in our people. Lastly there should be much greater effort on the part of the educated men to bridge the mental distance

between them and the people in the rural areas, so that there might be sympathetic understanding of the problems of village improvement. All officers should spend more and more of their time living with the people in the villages for the greater part of the year. This is the only way to win their confidence.

10. Exactly a hundred years ago, writing about Americans, J.S. Mill said:—

"Let them be left without a government, everybody of Americans is able to improvise one and to carry on that, or any other business, with a sufficient amount of intelligence, order and decision. This is what every free people ought to be and a people capable of this is certain to be free."

We should have this ideal of a 'free people' in mind when we develop self-government in rural areas. The wider the participation of the people in our programmes of social and economic development the more fruitful will be the results. The community development movement can be of value only if it continues always as a people's movement deriving dynamism from the people.

I am afraid I have taken up a great deal more of your time than I intended to. I am glad the Institute of Public Administration has arranged this Seminar and has assembled a competent team for discussing the fundamental issues that have been set down for discussion. I am sure that those who are engaged in working the movement will derive much useful guidance from your labours.

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